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For Immediate Release
April 29, 2003

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Surveillance Activities in Place as Mosquito Season Approaches

County had one locally-acquired case of West Nile virus in 2002; virus is expected to return.

LOS ANGELES – The Los Angeles County Department of Health Services (DHS) is increasing mosquito surveillance activities as mosquito-breeding season gets underway in Southern California. Top among the mosquito-borne viruses health officials are looking for is the West Nile virus (WNV). First detected in the United States in 1999, WNV is transmitted to people and animals by infected mosquitoes. Last year, despite no evidence of infected mosquitoes, one county resident tested positive for the virus; the individual made a full recovery. Public health officials concluded this individual acquired WNV infection locally within Los Angeles County. This raised the alarm bells among public health officials that WNV had now spread to the west coast.

The health department has several programs with responsibilities in the surveillance, prevention, testing and investigation of WNV. In close collaboration with the California State Department of Health Services and local Vector Control Districts, surveillance of birds, sentinel chicken flocks and mosquito pools are being increased.

The health department also collects dead birds (owls, hawks, crows, ravens) and tissue samples to determine if they were infected with the virus.

WNV is spread to humans from the bite of an infected mosquito; a mosquito is infected by biting a bird that carries the virus. Most mosquitoes do not carry the virus and most people bitten by a mosquito have not been exposed to the virus. The virus is NOT spread by person-to-person contact or directly from birds to humans. Last year, it was also demonstrated that WNV infection could be transmitted through infected transplanted organs and blood products. It should be noted, these newer methods of transmission represent a very small proportion of WNV cases.

“Control of West Nile infection over the long-term will require the collaboration of state and local government agencies, as well as increased vigilance by the public to eliminate sources of stagnant water where mosquitoes may breed,” said Jonathan Fielding, M.D., M.P.H., Public Health Director and County Health Officer.

Preventive Measures

Residents are asked to prevent mosquitoes from breeding by eliminating water sources around their yards.

- Do not allow water to sit in old tires, flowerpots, trash, swimming pools, birdbaths, pet bowls, etc.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools; drain water from pool covers.
- Stock garden ponds with goldfish or mosquito fish. They eat the mosquito eggs and larvae.
- Empty and wash birdbaths and wading pools every few days.

The following precautions will reduce a person's risk to all mosquito-borne diseases:

- Avoid mosquito-infested areas at dawn and dusk.

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- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants whenever you are outdoors.
- Use insect repellent products with no more than 35 % DEET for adults and less than 10% for children.
- Ensure your windows have screens that do not have holes.

Exposure to West Nile Virus

Fewer than one out of 150 people who are bitten by an infected mosquito get severely ill, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In most cases people who are infected never become sick or have only very mild symptoms for a few days. The virus can in rare cases cause encephalitis and death. The elderly are most at risk for severe cases of the disease. There is no specific treatment for the West Nile virus. In a serious case, an individual may be hospitalized to ensure good supportive care.

Most people who are infected with WNV have no symptoms. Of those that become ill, symptoms include fever, headache, nausea, body aches and a mild skin rash. In a few cases, the disease will progress to encephalitis.

Animals and West Nile Virus

Although the vast majority of WNV infections in animals have been identified in birds, WNV has been shown to infect horses, cats, bats, chipmunks, skunks, squirrels, and domestic rabbits. An equine WNV vaccine recently became available for horses. For more information, visit www.cdffa.ca.gov/ahfss/ah.

The public is encouraged to report if a recently dead bird (dead less than 24 hours) is found; contact 1-877-747-2243.

More information is available on the DHS website at www.ladhs.org.

Where to call with questions about mosquitoes

Greater Los Angeles County Vector Control District (562) 944-9656

Los Angeles County West Vector Control District (310) 915-7370

San Gabriel Valley Mosquito and Vector Control District (626) 814-9466

Antelope Valley Mosquito and Vector Control District (661) 942-2917

Compton Creek Mosquito Abatement District (310) 639-7375

Where to report suspected human cases of WNV infection

During business hours, call the Acute Communicable Disease Control Unit at (213) 240-7941.

Or, use the Los Angeles County Department of Health's Confidential Morbidity Report.

You can fax your report to the Morbidity Central Reporting Unit (MCRU) at 888-397-3778.

Public Health is committed to protecting and improving the health of the nearly 10 million residents of Los Angeles County. Through a variety of programs, community partnerships and services, Public Health oversees environmental health, disease control and community and family health and comprises more than 3,800 employees with an annual budget exceeding \$465 million.